

Wurzburg, incriminated at least 94 of 347 publications by Dr Hermann, 29 of them showing clear evidence of forgery. Drs Hermann and Brach were dismissed from their university posts and had to abandon their academic careers.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

Nuffield Council invites public to join genetics debate

The public is being asked for its views on the implications of the way genes may determine certain human traits, such as aggression, antisocial behaviour, alcoholism, homosexuality, and intelligence.

In a consultation document launched this week, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics has invited the public to join in a discussion on what it recognises as the "complex issues" that are being raised by the drive to uncover links between genetic makeup and human behaviour. Depending on how the discussions develop, the working party responsible for the consultation may produce guidelines for researchers in the field and launch a campaign to help explain the issues to the public.

"This is an important area of research that affects the way in which we think about ourselves and has implications for the way we treat other people," said the director of the council, Dr Sandy Thomas. "The council is very keen to hear the views of members of the public on these difficult questions."

Zosia Kmiotowicz *London*

An information pack giving details about the working party and some of the main issues is available on www.nuffieldfoundation.org/bioethics

Israel extends smoking ban

A committee of Israel's parliament unexpectedly adopted regulations last week that make its antismoking laws among the most rigorous in the world.

Soon after returning from the recess called because of the prime ministerial election, the Knesset's labour, social affairs, and health committee approved the banning of smoking in the public places where it had not been previously banned or restricted by the original 1983 law or two subsequent amendments.



CHRIS STOWERS/PANOS PICTURES

In three months, when the new restrictions take effect, smoking will be banned in all hospitals and medical clinics, public areas of shopping malls, public corridors or waiting rooms, lecture halls and celebration halls, and facilities used for performances. Separate, ventilated smoking areas will be designated for smokers' use.

In all these cases, the owner of the facility may ban smoking altogether.

About 27% of Israelis over the age of 18 smoke. The Israel Cancer Association welcomed the new regulations but others were not pleased. Left wing member of parliament Ilan Gilon, who smokes three packets a day, attacked the new Likud government for "launching a stupid campaign against smokers by banning smoking in public places instead of investing their time on expanding the basket of health services and technologies."

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

Rubella vaccine may be safe in early pregnancy

Deborah Josefson *San Francisco*

Rubella vaccinations may be safe during early pregnancy, a new study from the University of Toronto in Canada has reported.

The findings, presented recently at the annual meeting of the American Society for Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics in Orlando, Florida, raise doubts about the need to consider abortion because of exposure to the vaccine in early pregnancy. They also challenge the long held belief that it is essential to avoid vaccinating pregnant women against rubella for fear of the vaccination itself inducing the congenital rubella syndrome.

Rubella is a togavirus that usually causes mild illness, characterised by an upper respiratory infection, measles-like rash, fever, and lymphadenopathy. Complications of the disease include arthritis, encephalitis, and congenital rubella. Congenital rubella occurs when a woman contracts the rubella virus during her first trimester of pregnancy.

About 85% of women who catch rubella in the first trimester transmit it to their fetus. Hallmarks of the syndrome in the child are sensorineural deafness; congenital heart defects; learning difficulties; eye defects such as cataracts, glaucoma, retinopathy, and microphthalmos; and bone defects. Hepatosplenomegaly and miscarriages are also common.

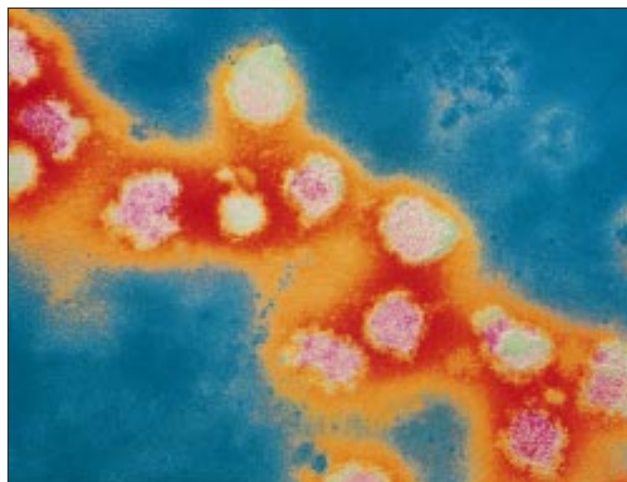
As the rubella virus is so virulent early in pregnancy, the vaccine, which is composed of weakened live virus, is not advised during that time. In addition, women who receive the vaccine are cautioned to avoid conceiving for three months.

Retrospective evidence, however, has suggested that the risk of the syndrome developing after vaccination early in pregnancy is small. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintained a register of pregnant women who inadvertently received the vaccine between 1979 and 1989 and found no cases of the syndrome in the newborn infants of the 321 women enrolled.

The current study, led by Dr Zina Levichek of the Motherisk Program at the University of Toronto in Canada, compared the rates of fetal malformations in the infants of 94 women who mistakenly received rubella vaccinations while pregnant with 94 pregnant women who were not vaccinated during pregnancy.

The rate of fetal anomalies was similar in both groups. In addition, no significant differences existed in miscarriage rates, birth weight, or developmental milestones between the two groups. Hearing test results were also equivalent across the groups.

The only significant difference was the higher rate of abortions in the group who received vaccinations during pregnancy. □



Electron micrograph of rubella viruses

NIBSC/SP